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Best of Blacks May Be in Jail

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IF YOU THINK of prison education programs as devices for rehabilitating social misfits and losers, you will have trouble understanding Federal City College's Lorton project.

Dr. Andress Taylor, director of the project, insists that he is less concerned about rehabilitation *per se* than about restoring to the black community its brightest, most talented people.

"Our best men are at Lorton (correctional facilities)," he said. "Not just here but all over the country, the prisons contain our aggressive, black leadership."

"The idea of the Lorton project is to rescue these men and restore them to the black community."

It sounds a little hoked up, and to tell the truth Dr. Taylor does tend to exuberance when he talks about his program.

But he is right when he speaks of the number of good minds behind prison walls and when he says, particularly with reference to the black slums, that the community's best minds may be in jail.

The point is frequently missed because we tend to look at prisons on the basis of a white model. And it is true that white prisoners—or middle-class black ones—do tend to represent the misfits.

But the slum kid who grows up without getting into trouble with the law may be his community's misfit. Certainly the bright, aggressive leader in the slums is far more likely than his middle-class counterpart to get into trouble.

IT IS PARTLY a result of the differences in which we enforce the law in different parts of town, partly a question of realistic ambition,

partly a matter of success models.

As Dr. Taylor puts it, the most obvious success figure in a low-income neighborhood is not the father who works hard and stays out of trouble (and in poverty) but the cool-dressing, Cadillac-driving hustler.

The youngsters who are successful at emulating this model are likely to be the

brightest in the neighborhood. They are also very likely to wind up in prison.

But this is more than a mere guess. The first crop of Lorton students under Dr. Taylor's program earned a grade average of 2.8 out of a possible 4—perhaps a full point higher than the student average at Federal City College.

One former inmate-student has been admitted to FCC's masters program in adult basic education and plans to pursue a doctorate in counseling and rehabilitation. But far more of them are interested in business management, engineering and other professional pursuits than in social work, Dr. Taylor said.

THERE HAS been a surprising amount of cooperation between other government agencies and the Lorton-FCC project. Health, Education and Welfare, for instance, has instituted a program of hiring student parolees as GS-3s with the promise of rapid promotions to about GS-7 for the successful ones. (Some parolees employed by the government say they already are working far beyond their grade levels.)

The quickie promotions, like special help for released prisoners who want to go to school full time, and other special considerations, raises the question whether it is fair to have a man's criminal record work to his advantage. Doesn't this amount to discrimination against the guy who managed to keep out of trouble in the first place?

The question doesn't disturb Dr. Taylor. As he sees it, our criminal justice system has many of the earmarks of slavery: Either work for the man or go to jail.

"We're not talking about special favors," he insists. "We are talking about rescuing the cream of our communities. If Africans had tried to stop a slave ship that was taking their brothers to America, would that be a special favor? We need our men back, that's all."

By the way, for those who insist on viewing such things from a selfish point of view, the recidivism rate for parolees in the FCC-Lorton project is about 5 per cent. The overall rate for local felons is closer to 70 per cent.